

# PROCEEDINGS

## AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS

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### IS PARKING A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY?

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CITY PLANNING DIVISION

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## IS PARKING A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY?

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Before investigating the specific question, "Is Parking a Public Responsibility", it is important to consider several points to supply a background:

First, the parking problem in a small community is quite different from that in a large city. In a small town where there are no mass transportation facilities, or only token facilities, transportation needs must be handled almost entirely by private automobiles with sufficient parking spaces provided to meet the demand.

Recently, the plight of one community of 15,000 population has been brought to the attention of the writer. Its merchants and city officials are desperate to find additional off-street parking areas. The merchants are typical small town businessmen without substantial capital. Some have attempted to find parking areas, but have been blocked in their attempts. They have asked the one private lot operator in town to go along with them, but he maintains that he cannot find additional space on which to expand. As a result, this town has turned to a Parking Authority with the hope that through this means they will be able to provide additional off-street space.

Second, in our medium sized and large sized cities, the parking problem, of itself, can never really be solved. In most of our downtown districts, if the public is accommodated with off-street parking which is easily accessible and which charges reasonable rates, it will soon make optimum use of this space. The question, then, is not the parking problem alone, but a larger problem of over-all transportation within the city. Undoubtedly, mass transportation must carry a large portion of the burden. It is the most efficient carrier of a large number of persons, and means must be found that will make it more attractive to the traveling public. Too great a desertion from mass transportation to private automobiles will only congest the downtown streets making it impossible either for automobiles or transit vehicles to move efficiently.

On the other hand, it is also important to understand that the individual automobile owner cannot be denied. Fortunately, we are living in a democracy where a person has a free choice of how he travels. Our increased productivity and wealth, shown in part by the production of more and more automobiles and greater use of each automobile, is one factor in helping to change our traveling habits. The nation is becoming more mobile and more impatient with inadequate transportation and terminal facilities. Because our mode of life is changing in this manner, we must realize that there will be ever increasing pressure

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on the part of the traveling public to use individual means of transportation. If some people want to drive their cars downtown to work or to shop, and are willing to pay for the privilege, they will do just that.

As you know, our cities are now in the process of decentralization. This attraction to the suburbs is greater in some areas than in others, but I think it can safely be said that all students of the problem recognize that this decentralization, to a certain extent, is inevitable. However, we must face up to the fact, that, although it cannot be stopped, decentralization must be controlled in order to save our central cities.

The primary function of the central city as a center of commerce, banking, recreation and culture must be protected, and the basic key to this protection is to arrest the trend of decreasing tax values at the city's core. This is not an academic question, but a practical life and death matter to city officials, since the downtown district provides a majority of the real estate tax revenue for the whole city. A solution to the over-all problem of transportation to and from the city is fundamental in safeguarding the values of the downtown district. And the provision of adequate off-street parking spaces in the downtown area is one part of the answer to the transportation problem.

The last point, and one which cannot be emphasized too much, is that parking is merely a service for the basic use of the downtown area. If there were no generators of traffic in the downtown district—if there were no retail stores and banks, or office buildings, theaters, or hotels or other meeting places—certainly there would not be any need for parking facilities. As a use in itself, parking is nothing. It only serves to accommodate the people who want to avail themselves of the variety of primary uses in the downtown district.

### The Historical Significance of Private Enterprise

Until the recent past, off-street parking spaces have been supplied almost entirely by private enterprise. In the beginning of the motor age, automobiles were stored in open lots and in converted buildings. In the 1920's there was a flurry of construction of closed-in buildings designed expressly for the parking of motor vehicles. And beginning in the mid 30's, open-deck garages began to be constructed in an effort to reduce construction costs. Practically all of this past activity was generated by private enterprise.

With private enterprise beginning the effort, why did it not continue, alone, to serve the public? Would there have been any interest in creating public agencies to handle the parking problem if private enterprise had adequately satisfied the demands of the using public? It is significant to note that almost all public agencies now in existence have been created since the end of World War II.

### Why Is Parking Not Entirely A Private Responsibility?

Let's look at this question of private versus public responsibility for a moment. Why is parking not entirely a private responsibility?

In the first place, the location of an off-street parking facility is of paramount importance. Surveys have shown time and time again that parkers will not walk great distances from where they park their cars

to their destination. Therefore, parking facilities must be conveniently located to centers of large demand. Often times the private parking developer cannot get the most advantageous location for an off-street facility. In his attempt to collect a plot of land large enough to construct an efficient garage, he may be completely blocked by a recalcitrant owner of a small property holding out for an exorbitant amount of money.

Second, acquisition of land and construction of a parking facility is usually a major undertaking. And with rising costs of construction added to the burden, the private entrepreneur often does not have sufficient risk capital to invest on a long term basis. However, within the past year or so, there have been several examples of joint parking operator-merchant cooperation to overcome this financial hiatus.

Third, in many instances the private operator does not have in mind the over-all parking picture within the downtown area and throughout the city. His primary interest must be in his own establishment and not primarily with the welfare of the central business district.

Finally, we must realize that the primary objective of the private operator is profit. Certainly this is not to be criticized or decried. Our entire economy is based on the profit motive. However, in a situation where the demand is much greater than the supply the temptation to boost prices beyond a reasonable limit is often very great, particularly if the rate increase will not substantially change the number of automobiles using the facility. And, if the law of supply and demand cannot function due to the inability of private enterprise to meet the demand, an unbalanced supply and demand ratio may continue.

#### What Is the Answer?

There is no absolute, carefully delineated answer to the question of public versus private management of parking facilities. It is almost as varied as the number of cities we might have and depends to a great extent on the conditions existing in those cities.

In some cities, private operators have realized their responsibility and, in working with merchants and other downtown property owners, have reached a reasonable workable solution to the parking problem.

In other cities, private parking operators have not faced up to the facts. They have gone their own separate ways and have met the situation with a denial that any problem exists.

As for the question of responsibility, it would be difficult to deny that the public does have a certain responsibility in this matter of off-street parking. Briefly, the responsibility is to see that adequate spaces are supplied in our business districts sufficient to satisfy a good part of the demand.

#### What Mechanism Is Necessary to Meet the Problem?

It is the author's contention that, in any event, an over-all agency is necessary in our cities which will keep a continuous watch on the parking situation and will be ready and able to supply information on parking supply and demand. This should be a public agency which will act as an information bureau and fact-gathering organization.

Additional responsibilities of this public body may vary. Briefly, here is what three cities have done.

#### Baltimore, Maryland

In Baltimore, Maryland, an Off Street Parking Commission has been created as an arm of the city government. The underlying principle of the Baltimore plan is to deal with the parking problem within the framework and spirit of the private enterprise system. The Commission makes 20 year loans at relatively low interest rates not to exceed 85% of the cost of the project. As a control the Commission requires approval of location and garage plans. So far, twenty garages have been constructed within the Commission framework.

#### Kansas City, Missouri

In Kansas City a separate Traffic Department has been created within the City government. This Traffic Department not only has the usual traffic engineering duties but also is assigned the responsibility for off-street parking. This responsibility includes (1) making a continuous study of public and private off-street parking facilities and reporting from time to time as to the necessity for establishing additional off-street facilities; (2) encouraging development of off-street parking projects by private operators and cooperating with private operators by furnishing them with available information; (3) acquiring and developing off-street parking facilities where private operators have not met demands either through inability to obtain property or lack of interest in providing adequate facilities; (4) leasing these facilities so constructed by the city to private operators for operation; and (5) operating the public parking facilities if private operators are not interested or will not enter into a lease agreement satisfactory to the city.

This list of responsibilities shows that the city desires to give private operators first opportunity to meet parking demands, with the city only moving into construction and operation if private operators cannot or will not meet the problem.

#### Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

In Pittsburgh, a Public Parking Authority has been functioning since 1947. This Authority, as well as all other Parking Authorities in Pennsylvania, is a public, non-profit corporation established under definitive legislation of the State. The Authority's governing body is composed of five non-paid members charged with the responsibility of conducting research on the parking problem and establishing a permanent coordinated system of parking facilities with power to plan, design, acquire, construct, maintain, operate or lease facilities devoted to the parking of motor vehicles.

In the Law, the Authority was declared to be exempt from taxation on its real estate, but it may make payments to the taxing bodies in lieu of taxes.

Another power which the Authority has been given which is all important to its operations is that it can condemn property for parking



facilities. However, it cannot condemn the usual public uses or parking facilities which were in existence when the act was passed. Through this power of eminent domain, the Authority is enabled to acquire land on the proper location without being blocked by unreasonable demands for payment or complete refusal to sell. If it is necessary to condemn, a fair price for the property is determined by a court of law.

The power to issue bonds, especially revenue bonds, is an important element in the effectiveness of the Authority. Through the issuance of revenue bonds, additional parking facilities can be provided now, to be paid off over a period of years from parking revenue taken in by the facilities. Each new project is given very careful scrutiny by investment houses. Since the bonds must prove themselves to be a sound investment in order to make them marketable, there is little chance that the Parking Authority will provide an over-supply of parking spaces.

At the present time, the Public Parking Authority has two garages, totalling approximately 1600 spaces, constructed and in operation. These two garages were financed by a revenue bond issue. They are operated, not by the Authority, but under a lease agreement with an experienced private operator. The Authority owns two lots, totalling 330 spaces, on which garages will be constructed. These lots are also leased to private operators. In addition, the Authority has under construction an underground garage of 890 spaces to be surmounted by a city park. The Parking Authority has entered into an agreement in which Mellon Square Garage, Incorporated, a private corporation, will design, construct and operate the parking garage for a period of 38 years. The Garage Corporation will construct the underground garage at its own expense. Upon completion, the title to the structure will be vested in the Parking Authority and the Garage Corporation will operate it under a leasehold for the entire period of the lease. With the Authority working with private enterprise in this manner, a costly underground garage will be provided in a high demand location, which could not have been realized through private enterprise alone.

The members of the Public Parking Authority of Pittsburgh believe that their function is to supplement private lots and garages—to add parking spaces where there is a demand and not to take over existing facilities. As I have described to you, their attitude is that the Parking Authority facilities should not be operated directly by the Authority staff, but should be managed through carefully controlled lease agreements by experienced operators.

#### CONCLUSION

Very briefly, in conclusion, a proposed off-street parking program for our cities may be summarized as follows. A public agency should exist which would supply information and would act as a watch dog to evaluate the over-all parking situation in order to assure the public that its interests are safeguarded. The carrying out of the program may be done under private enterprise to the extent that the basic need is supplied. When private enterprise fails to supply this need, or cannot do it, then a public body must be able to step in to fill the gap.

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